



ARKANSAS SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA 2024-2025 SEASON



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Dear ASO patrons,

Welcome to the 2024-25 concert season! I am so happy the ASO can perform its full orchestra concerts in this beautiful performance hall, Robinson Center, and I am so grateful the Arkansas Symphony Orchestra now has its first real home—the new ASO Stella Boyle Smith Music Center located at 1101 East Third Street, between Heifer International and the Clinton Presidential Library.

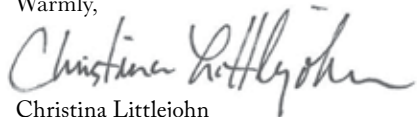


We opened the new Stella Boyle Smith Music Center on September 14 with puppets, jugglers, marching bands, Irish dancers, Mexican dancers, and more. Our aspiration is for the center to be a Radically Welcoming Hub of Musical Activity for all Arkansans and our opening celebration reflected those aspirations. We commissioned ASO Youth Orchestra alum Jeremy Crosmer to write the first piece of music publicly performed by ASO musicians, youth orchestra, and community orchestra members. He named it “Skyward,” for the direction your ASO is going. The Sanctuary Choir of Saint Mark Baptist Church joined ASO musicians for an afternoon performance, and all who wished joined Geoff Robson for a Beethoven Five Play-along. The evening culminated with a Masquerade Dance Party where hundreds of people, mostly in their 30s danced the night away to the music of the Dizzy 7. The weekend could not have been more perfect. Outdoor activities with community partners included book reading, balloon making, crafts, instrument petting zoo, bucket band play-along, and more. The rain stopped before the parade and didn’t come back until after the outdoor activities were winding up.

So many people worked hard to make this music center a reality for Little Rock and Arkansas, starting with our fantastic architects, WER Architects of Little Rock, Ben Gregory, David Sargent, and team, and Bailey Construction of Little Rock. This music center was built on budget and on time, and it is simply incredible. When you walk into the spaces, you can tell our home is designed for making music, hearing music, and building community through music.

The Arkansas Symphony Orchestra is committed to three things: building our community with music, being artistically innovative, and maintaining financial discipline. The new ASO Stella Boyle Smith Music Center is the manifestation of these core values, and it will enable thousands of Arkansans the opportunity to experience and make music together for generations. ASO is opening a fully funded \$11.75 million Music Center so soon after the pandemic because of three key guiding principles the volunteer leaders of this orchestra embedded in our DNA over the last 50 years: it’s about the music and community, show up for the hard work, and have fun. These fundamentals are seen in the ASO administrative team, musicians, board, and throughout the new ASO Stella Boyle Smith Music Center—a radically welcoming hub of musical activity for all Arkansans. Thank you to all the volunteer leaders who have made the music center a reality through the decades and for your participation with ASO this weekend.

Warmly,



Christina Littlejohn

ASO

ARKANSAS
SYMPHONY
ORCHESTRA

Thank you



for your extraordinary support of the

Stella Boyle Smith
MASTERWORKS Series

FROM THE MUSIC DIRECTOR



Dear Music Lovers,

Welcome to the '24-'25 season with your Arkansas Symphony Orchestra! It's an honor and joy to serve as the Music Director of this sensational orchestra, and I am thrilled that you are in the concert hall to enjoy their glorious sounds!

On the main stage here at the Robinson Center, we have a season lineup that will once again show off the orchestra as a virtuosic ensemble capable of bringing any music to life. This was encapsulated in our opening night program, which featured jazz star Aaron Diehl playing Gershwin's Concerto in F and Carlos Simon's *Graffiti*, which portrays urban contemporary art through music. We followed our opening night with three performances of *The Empire Strikes Back*, live to film!

This season we celebrated the return of *Beethoven and Blue Jeans*, a dressed-down affair that encourages you to come enjoy a beautiful symphony concert in a relaxed atmosphere. Throughout the season you'll hear works by great composers like Mendelssohn, Sibelius, Liszt, and more. We will close the Masterworks season with the master of composing at the grandest scale, Gustav Mahler's Symphony No. 7.

We will also feature works by some of the greatest living composers. I am thrilled to bring to the stage a violin concerto by Philip Glass, and I also can't wait to introduce you to the music of Mexican composer Gabriela Ortiz, whose music is full of pounding rhythms and excitement.

Our *Home for the Holidays* concert will be an extravagant celebration of the season, replete with 100 voice choir, and featuring the winners of last year's Arkansas Talent vocal competition, Marcus Murphy and Kim Qualls. Our last concert of the season will be a major collaboration with Arkansas Circus Arts, which will blend live symphonic music with stunning acrobatics. We'll perform some deep cuts of great film music with our *Superheroes vs. Villains* concert, and the best hits of contemporary musical theater with *Broadway Rocks!*

The ASO has been busy demonstrating its commitment to being an artistically innovative organization and a cultural institution accessible to all. This has been embodied in our newly opened ASO Stella Boyle Smith Music Center, our new headquarters and home of our wide-ranging music education programs. It is also the new home of our River Rhapsodies chamber music series, where you can hear small groups of ASO's outstanding musicians perform in an intimate environment.

It is an exciting time for this organization, and we want you to be part of it! Starting at just \$9 per month, our nationally recognized membership program is a great way to enjoy all of our concerts with the ultimate flexibility and ease of access. I encourage you to come see and hear something new, and seek out what you know will be your favorite concerts. Follow us on social media for all the latest news and updates, and I hope you enjoy hearing your marvelous Arkansas Symphony Orchestra perform live all year!

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Geoffrey Robson', written in a cursive style.

Geoffrey Robson

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lift your spirits.

Take
**good
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Friday, December 20, 2024 • 7:30 PM
Saturday, December 21, 2024 • 7:30 PM Sunday, December 22, 2024 • 3:00 PM
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Home for the Holidays

Geoffrey Robson, *conductor*

Kim Qualls • Marcus Murphy, *vocalists*

Bryant High School Camerata

Tanner Oglesby, *director*

Little Rock Central High School Madrigals

Christy Fudge, *director*

Parkview Arts & Science Magnet School Choir

Mary Shollmier, *director*

CamRyn Stillman, *associate director*

arr. Sebesky A Christmas Scherzo

ALAN SILVESTRI Concert Suite from

arr. Brubaker *The Polar Express*

arr. Mark Hayes Kay Thompson's Jingle Bells

ADOLPH ADAM O Holy Night

arr. Leavitt

KENT, GANNON & RAM I'll Be Home for Christmas

arr. Trotter *Marcus Murphy, vocalist*

Home for the Holidays *continued*

HATHAWAY & MCKINNOR This Christmas
arr. McKenzie *Marcus Murphy, vocalist*

MEL TORMÉ/arr. Grean The Christmas Song
Marcus Murphy, vocalist

arr. Catingub Joy to the World

I N T E R M I S S I O N

REGNEY & SHAYNE Do You Hear What I Hear?
arr. Simeone

arr. Richman Hanukkah Medley

arr. Stapleton The First Noel
Kim Qualls, vocalist

UPPERROOM Come and Behold
arr. Abraham *Kim Qualls, vocalist*

MEREDITH WILSON It's Beginning to Look
arr. McKenzie a Lot Like Christmas
Kim Qualls, vocalist

CAROLE SAGER The Prayer
arr. Cunha *Kim Qualls and Marcus Murphy, vocalists*

CHRISTIANSON & ANDERSON Hallelujah Chorus
from *The Gospel Messiah*

PLEASE SILENCE ALL ELECTRONIC DEVICES. THANK YOU.

Use of cameras and recording equipment is not permitted in the concert hall.
The Arkansas Symphony Orchestra is supported in part by a grant from the
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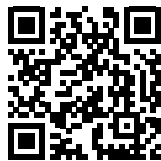
For over 56 years, thousands of volunteers from the Arkansas Symphony Orchestra Guild have used music and the arts to make a profound impact on the lives of children and adults.

With award winning programs, millions of dollars raised, and curricula for youth of all ages and demographics, the ASOG is at the forefront of the quest to provide music education and opportunity for the state of Arkansas.

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Join us today and help bring to life quality educational programs such as Orchestra & You, the Stella Boyle Smith Trust Young Artists Competition, the Children's Concert, and the Arkansas Symphony Youth Orchestra.

Home for the Holidays

GEOFFREY ROBSON, Conductor, *Pamela Diane Stephens Conductor's Chair*

KIM QUALLS, Vocalist MARCUS MURPHY, Vocalist

BRYANT HIGH SCHOOL CAMERATA, Tanner Oglesby, Director

LITTLE ROCK CENTRAL HIGH SCHOOL MADRIGALS, Christy Fudge, Director

PARKVIEW ARTS & SCIENCE MAGNET SCHOOL CHOIR, Mary Shollmier, Director
CamRyn Stillman, Associate Director**VIOLIN**Kiril Laskarov
*Concertmaster**Dora Paley Ronnel*
*Concertmaster's Chair*Andrew Irvin
Concertmaster

*†Meredith Maddox Hicks

*Principal Second Violin**Eric M. Hayward*
Memorial Chair

‡Linnaea Brophy

†Charlotte Crosmer

Leanne Day-Simpson

‡Trisha McGovern Freeneey

Linda Hsu

Kristen Kunkel

Beth Massa

Sandra McDonald

Tom McDonald

Geronimo Oyenard

Lauren Pokorzynski

Tarrah Reynolds

Magdalena Ryszkowski

Algimantas Staskevicius

Leigh Wing

VIOLA

‡Katherine Reynolds

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Tatiana Kotcherguina

†Timothy MacDuff

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Beth Wheeler

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Principal

Erin Cameron

BASS CLARINET

Jacob Gatlin

BASSOON

Marissa Takaki

Principal

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HARP

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Principal

PIANO

Carl Anthony
Principal
Guy & Brigita Gardner Chair

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 Jayshawn Bolden
 Jalen Brooks
 Gage Butler
 Lucy Byrd
 Olive Byrd
 Kelsi Clay
 Elizabeth Curtis
 Gabrielle Finley
 Emma Gatlin
 Ella Grace Harris
 Lois Hookstra
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Lea Johnson
 Vienna Lewis
 Chetana Mandali
 Sylvie Newman
 Kaitlyn Self
 Adyson Shelton
 Alexander Smith
 Wyatt Snyder
 Kamaya Terry
 Dhruvika Thota
 Kyira Thornton
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 Laci Baugh
 Matthew Bennett
 Quinton Cavanagh
 Andre' Davis
 Jesus Garcia
 Sierra Gibbs
 Michelle Hernandez
 Hannah Heston
 Dawson Hoover
 AJ Johnson
 Lucy Karp
 Newton Lam
 Ericciah Lasage
 Sadie Ledbetter
 Kyla Lipsie
 Braden Lisowe
 Hunter McPherson
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 Xi Bailey
 Lila Bass
 Jalyn Bell
 Mitchell Bordelon
 Bradley Casey
 Landon Chambers
 Jayden Davis
 Amelia Diaz
 Gracie Diggs
 Karrington Easter
 Diyel Edwards
 Sadie Edwards
 Gloria Elebeke
 Alisha Ferguson
 Jayden Ferguson
 Aniya Foster
 Johanna Fuentes
 Noa Hall
 Brayden Harris
 Caden Helm
 Miah Jemerson
 Breanna Jenkins

Valoria Johnson
 Leah Jones
 Reagan Jordan
 Ty Jordan
 Israel Knight
 Madison Lunon
 Kylen Mack
 Makannah Martin
 David Maxwell
 Brooklyn Moore
 Aidan Mull
 Kalani Neasley
 Nadia Owens
 Talara Parker
 Jermaine Penny
 Reagan Pitts
 MaKenzi Pye
 Christopher Sanchez
 Sierra Spinler
 Colin Starr
 Brylie Sutton
 Alice Thorpe
 Amir Weatherspoon



PHOTO: JOS MAZZA

GEOFFREY ROBSON, *Music Director*

Geoffrey Robson, violinist and conductor, is the Music Director of the Arkansas Symphony Orchestra. Prior to his appointment, his tenure as the Arkansas Symphony's Artistic Director and Principal Conductor was a significant success. His dynamic leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in national and state-wide visibility for the organization. The orchestra's *Bedtime with Bach* online concert series received nationwide acclaim and was featured by the *Washington Post* and the *Kelly Clarkson Show*.

During his tenure with the ASO, Robson has conducted critically acclaimed and sold-out masterworks, pops, chamber, and educational concerts throughout the state. His innovative programming has brought new audiences into the hall and made all feel welcome and has inspired and energized the orchestra.

In 2021, he conducted and served as executive producer for the recording of Florence Price's *Concerto in One Movement* with the Arkansas Symphony Orchestra, featuring pianist Karen Walwyn. This was the orchestra's first commercial release in over 20 years. In the fall of 2024, the orchestra will release a recording of Christopher Theofanidis' *The Wind and Petit Jean*, also conducted and produced by Robson.

A champion of new music, he collaborates with and explores the music of renowned living composers. In 2016, he conducted the world premiere of James Stephenson's *Concerto for Hope* with celebrated trumpeter Ryan Anthony. He served as arranger, conductor, and violinist for the world premiere of *Billy Blythe*, a one-act opera based on the life of the young Bill Clinton, by Bonnie Montgomery. He conducted the premiere of *Into the Beautiful North* by Joe Brent, performed by the 9 Horses trio, as well as the premiere of *Richard III, A Crown of Roses, A Crown of Thorns*, an opera by Karen Griebing. In 2021 and 2022, he secured co-commissions of new works by Tania León and James Lee III, which were performed by the Arkansas Symphony Orchestra.

An active violinist, Robson is an avid chamber musician and regularly collaborates with musicians across the country. He also serves as the Artistic Director of the Faulkner Chamber Music Festival, curating a summer concert series and directing the chamber music camp for students.

He served as concertmaster of the Connecticut Virtuosi Chamber Orchestra and as Assistant Concertmaster of the Waterbury Symphony. He is also recognized for his skill and versatility as a fiddle player and has established himself as a highly sought-after studio musician. He writes and performs string and orchestral arrangements for recording artists to assist them in achieving their goals in the studio. His arrangements have also been featured on numerous Arkansas Symphony Orchestra performances.

Robson studied orchestral conducting at the Mannes College of Music in New York City under the tutelage of David Hayes, and he holds violin performance degrees from Yale University and the Michigan State University Honors College. Primary violin teachers include Erick Friedman, Dmitri Berlinsky, James Krehbiel, and I-fu Wang.

He studied conducting at Yale University with Lawrence Leighton Smith, Edward Cumming, and Shinik Hahm. Other notable teachers include John Farrer, Neil Thomson, Joana Carneiro, Dirk Brossé, and Larry Rachleff.



KIM QUALLS, Vocalist

Kim started singing at two years old and recording at the age of six. With her family, she grew up singing in churches across the country. Kim has spent the last 23 years as a professional vocalist here in central Arkansas. Her work includes fundraisers, ASO concerts, various ministry events around the state as well as recording music for local churches and multiple artists. She has been a vocal coach to students of the SMTI program at The Rep, as well as a private vocal coach for 13 years. With a degree in vocal performance, she has won first place awards from NATS in both classical and musical theatre. She currently serves as a part-time worship leader at South City Church in Little Rock. Kim is also a stay-at-home mother of two and enjoys playing music with her husband and painting.

MARCUS MURPHY, Vocalist

Marcus Murphy is a living testament to the idea that your gifts will make room for you. Among his impressive musical accomplishments, he has sung on a nationally syndicated commercial for BET Stars, performed on Broadway in the production of *The Lion King Kick Off* touring play, and has been part of a group that opened for or provided background vocals for renowned artists such as Diane Reeves, Kenny Loggins, Phillip Bailey, and a host of gospel artists. His soul's journey toward fulfilling his destiny has now brought him to Little Rock.



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ENDOWMENT SUPPORT



The Arkansas Symphony would like to thank the following donors who have made a lasting commitment to great symphonic music and music education in Arkansas through their gifts to the Arkansas Symphony Orchestra Foundation. The Arkansas Symphony Orchestra is now in its 59th season, and these gifts to the ASO Foundation help ensure future generations can enjoy the artistic excellence and education programs of the orchestra for the next 50 seasons and beyond.

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The E. Lee Ronnel Music Academy expands ASO's capacity to reach and serve Arkansas children and adults through music education programs. These are designed to develop **confidence**, **creative thinking** and **a strong work ethic** that will enhance students' musical endeavors and life skills. The E. Lee Ronnel Music Academy will also support the development of future music programs in the Stella Boyle Smith Music Center that may include adult music classes, bucket band, children's choir and more.

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Arkansas Symphony Orchestra opened its new \$11.75 million Stella Boyle Smith Music Center in Little Rock's East Village in September 2024, creating a first-of-its-kind music-focused headquarters for the state. The new 20,000-square-foot, state-of-the-art facility is the Symphony's first permanent home in its 58-year history.

PHOTO: DERO SANFORD AND WER ARCHITECTS

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JOSEPH YOUNG, *Guest Conductor*

Powerful, precise, and deeply expressive, American conductor Joseph Young stands out with dynamic performances that boldly reframe the classical canon, pairing established composers with new and emergent voices to create contemporary narratives that consistently draw new and diverse audiences.

In the 2024-2025 season, Young has debuts and return engagements with the National Philharmonic, Orquesta Sinfónica RTVE, the Liverpool Philharmonic, and the Louisville Orchestra, among many others. He makes his Lyric Opera of Chicago debut conducting Jeanine Tesori and Tazewell Thompson's opera *Blue*, which he led to great acclaim with the Washington National Opera. In summer

2024, he led the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra in the Cincinnati Opera's world-premiere staging of Paul McCartney's *Liverpool Oratorio*.

Recent engagements include debuts with the San Francisco Symphony, Seattle Symphony, the LA Phil at the Hollywood Bowl, National Symphony Orchestra, New Jersey Symphony, Detroit Symphony, the Sphinx Symphony, Orquesta Sinfónica do Porto Casa da Música (Portugal), and the Mzansi National Philharmonic Orchestra (South Africa).

Young is the Music Director of the Berkeley Symphony, a role he has held since 2019. Also a noted music educator, he is the Artistic Director of Ensembles and Chair of the Conducting program at the Peabody Conservatory. His long-time affiliation with Carnegie Hall's National Youth Orchestra (NYO2) culminated in 2023 with his Carnegie Hall debut, followed by the group's first international tour to the Dominican Republic.

Young began his career as a League of American Orchestras Conducting Fellow with the Baltimore Symphony and Buffalo Philharmonic, and went on to roles with the Atlanta and the Phoenix symphonies. He holds an Artist's Diploma from the Peabody Conservatory. Mentors include Jorma Panula, Robert Spano, and Marin Alsop, with whom he maintains an artistic partnership. He sits on the board of New Music USA.

JosephYoung.com | [@youngconductor](https://www.instagram.com/youngconductor)



ZEE ZEE, *Piano*

An imaginative and electrifying performer, Zee Zee is unique among the young generation of pianists. Described as “full of enthusiasm and glamour, radiating the vigor of youth,” (Chinese Gramophone) her interpretations and communicative abilities have been praised as “taking us to another reality... bright, expressive, and moving to the extreme” (Belgischer Rundfunk), while her creative maturity has been hailed as “a powerful, passionate, and compelling representation of pure artistry” (Los Angeles Times).

In the 23-24 season, Zee Zee returns to the BBC National Orchestra of Wales, Ulster Orchestra, Borusan Istanbul Philharmonic, Tucson Symphony Orchestra, Wigmore Hall, and Macao International Music Festival, among others. She will play with the Armenian State Symphony Orchestra, Oxford Philharmonic, Szczecin Philharmonic, and at Concertgebouw, Prague Spring Festival, Parnu Music Festival, Minnesota Beethoven Festival, InClassica Dubai International Music Festival among others. She will also play the season-opening concerts of both China Philharmonic and Shanghai Symphony Orchestra.

Highlights in recent seasons include the season-opening concert with the Estonian National Symphony under Neeme Järvi, with the Philharmonia orchestra at the Royal Festival Hall, and a tour in the UK under Paavo Järvi, three times with the Hong Kong Philharmonic under Christoph Koncz, Paavo Järvi, and Yu Long respectively, as well as the complete piano concertos of Beethoven and Saint-Saëns with the Shanghai Symphony Orchestra. She gave recitals at the Aspen Music Festival, Brevard Summer Music Festival, Lucerne Festival, Casa da Musica in Porto, Esplanade in Singapore, and Premiere Performance Hong Kong, among others.

In the past seasons, Zee Zee performed with leading orchestras worldwide including the BBC Symphony, BBC Philharmonic, BBC National Orchestra of Wales, London Philharmonic, Royal Liverpool Philharmonic, Philharmonia Orchestra, Belgian National Orchestra, Sinfonieorchester Basel, Tonhalle Orchestra Zurich, Borusan Istanbul Philharmonic, RTÉ Concert Orchestra, Macedonian Symphony, Warsaw Philharmonic, Janacek Philharmonic, Slovakia Philharmonic, Kristiansand Symphony, Turku Philharmonic, NHK Symphony, Hong Kong Philharmonic, Royal Bangkok Symphony, Los Angeles Philharmonic, San Francisco Symphony, Minnesota Symphony, Cincinnati Symphony, Seattle Symphony, Pasadena Symphony, Jacksonville Symphony, Pacific Symphony, Hawaii Symphony, among others. Zee Zee was a BBC New Generation Artist from 2013-2015 and performed at the Royal Albert Hall as a part of the BBC Proms.

Zee Zee has given a number of notable recitals, including at the Wigmore Hall in London, De Doelen in Rotterdam, Kennedy Center in Washington DC, Lincoln Center in New York, Vancouver Recital Society, and Hong Kong’s Premiere Performances, and has appeared at festivals such as MiTo Festival, the Gilmore Festival, Aspen Music Festival, Ravinia Festival, Brevard Music Center Summer Festival, Klavier-Festival Ruhr, Lucerne Festival, Biarritz Piano Festival, and the SJE Arts Series in Oxford.

She regularly works with some of today's leading conductors, including Marin Alsop, Jonathan Bloxham, Lionel Bringuier, Charles Dutoit, Alondra de la Parra, Domingo Hindoyan, Paavo Järvi, Neeme Järvi, Christoph Koncz, Michał Nesterowicz, Jun Märkl, Julian Rachlin, Yan Pascal Tortelier, Roberto Trevino, and Xian Zhang.

A passionate chamber musician, Zee Zee is a founding member of the Z.E.N. Trio, alongside violinist Esther Yoo and cellist Narek Hakhnazaryan. The trio released their first album featuring works from Brahms and Dvořák in 2017, and the second album featuring Shostakovich, Babadjanian, and Rachmaninov in 2019, both under Deutsche Gramophone. They tour regularly throughout the world, including the first highly acclaimed tour in North America in October 2019 with presenters such as San Francisco Performances, The Phillips Collection, Vancouver Recital Society, a 10-concert-tour in Australia with Musica Viva in August 2022, and Europe tours in May and November 2024.

Zee Zee is the founder and the artistic director of the Z+ international music festival, which takes place annually in Spring in Shanghai. As one of the biggest and most acclaimed chamber music festivals in Asia, she is in charge of its strategy, vision, and programming, cooperating with the best musicians around the world while contributing to the local community. The artists performing at the festival in April 2024 include Narek Hakhnazaryan, Clara-Jumi Kang, Sunwook Kim, Yura Lee, Ning Feng, Louis Schwizgebel, Julian Steckel, Esther Yoo, Haochen Zhang, and Diotima Quartet.

In October 2019, Universal released her first album under Deutsche Gramophone, featuring Ravel's *Piano Concerto in G* and Liszt's *Piano Concerto No. 2* with Paavo Järvi and the Philharmonia Orchestra, the second one, a solo album <journey> under Decca Classics featuring works from Wagner, Schönberg, and Liszt is released in May 2022.

Zee Zee began her musical training in Berlin, Germany at the age of five and soon became one of the most sought-after young artists of her generation. Having completed her piano studies with Dan Zhaoyi at the Shenzhen Arts School, Zee Zee continued her artistic development under the mentorship of Nelita True at the Eastman School of Music and Yoheved Kaplinsky and Robert McDonald at The Juilliard School, where she won the coveted Petschek Piano Award. Zee Zee was awarded first prize at China's 1st International Piano Concerto Competition, the Gina Bachauer International Artists Piano Competition, and the Krainev International Piano Competition. She was also a prizewinner at the 2013 Queen Elizabeth Competition. She has studied at the Peabody Institute with Leon Fleisher and continues to receive guidance from Alfred Brendel. She is currently based in Berlin and New York.

The logo for the Arkansas Symphony Orchestra is a stylized, dark, flowing shape that resembles a musical instrument or a ribbon, set against a black background.

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BALLADE IN A MINOR, OP. 33 / Samuel Coleridge-Taylor

b. London, England / August 15, 1875 – September 1, 1912

With orchestral flair, clear thematic ideas, and generous use of contrast, the obscure *Ballade in A Minor, Op. 33* by Samuel Coleridge-Taylor is a perfect programming choice for a concert opener. The composer was born in 1875 in England, and it's no wonder that this 1898 composition exhibits many hallmarks shared by symphonic works dating from the latter years of the 19th century. Listeners will notice the influence of composers like Peter Tchaikovsky, Johannes Brahms, and Antonin Dvořák, who exploited the versatility of the ever-expanding orchestra and the intricacies of chromatic harmony. British composer Edward Elgar was aware of Coleridge-Taylor's work, and his recommendation of the young man led to the commissioning of *Ballade*. Lasting just over ten minutes, only a few main musical ideas recur, alternating between rhythmically driven material and more rhapsodic moods. A chromatic three-note gesture is the most noticeable theme.

Samuel Coleridge-Taylor was introduced to the violin through his grandfather at an early age. Seeing his unique ability, his family sent him to study at the Royal College of Music at age 15. He soon gained international recognition as a composer. Sadly though, like Wolfgang Mozart and Franz Schubert, he died in his prime while still in his thirties.

PIANO CONCERTO NO. 1 / Franz Liszt

Raiding, Hungary / b. October 22, 1811 – July 31, 1886

During the years 1809 through 1811, four famous composers were born, in succession Felix Mendelsohn, Frédéric Chopin, Robert Schumann, and Franz Liszt. Each of them made their mark on music history, but Liszt outlasted the others by several decades, and he was a participant of practically the entire Romantic Era in music from beginning to end. He interacted closely with many composers, artists, and writers; photographs and paintings document his career.

As a teenager, Liszt was already an accomplished musician, and his family moved to Paris to support his growth. It is said that Liszt had an advantage over some other musicians—in addition to his ample skills as a composer and pianist, he was known to have a magnetic personality and charismatic appeal. This combination of traits was helpful as the days of financial support from the Church or royalty were over, and composers had to fend for themselves to earn public recognition and money.

Liszt started conceptualizing his *Piano Concerto No. 1* shortly after he heard the virtuoso violinist Niccolò Paganini perform in 1832. He was inspired by the technical prowess and expressive sensitivity demonstrated by Paganini and then sought to transfer Paganini's approach to music to the piano. Liszt was successful in this endeavor, composing and performing many piano works that astounded audiences just as Paganini had done with his violin.

Liszt's *Piano Concerto No. 1* had its first performance in 1855 with the composer as the piano soloist and Hector Berlioz as the conductor. While the score contains movement numbers with tempo indications, the 20-minute work is intended to be performed without interruption. The tempos follow the usual fast, slow, fast schema of the genre, but there are some incidental tempo and mood changes. The fast portions are, indeed, very difficult, and the slow passages offer the soloist and the orchestra chances for emotional expression.

Unique to this performance by your Arkansas Symphony Orchestra, there's a coincidental detail. Liszt's *Piano Concerto No. 1* opens with a three-note chromatic motif, as does the *Ballade* that opens the program.

NEGRO FOLK SYMPHONY / *William Dawson*

Anniston, Alabama / b. September 26, 1899 – May 2, 1990

The *Negro Folk Symphony* had a prestigious première on November 14, 1934, performed by the preeminent musicians of the Philadelphia Orchestra led by Leopold Stokowski. Composer William Dawson's work followed on the heels of the 1930s symphonic successes of two other African American composers, William Grant Still and Florence Price, both of whom have connections to Arkansas. Dawson revised his work in 1952 after a trip to Africa, and Stokowski championed that version as well. Interest in this symphony was revived in 2023 when the Philadelphia Orchestra released an exciting recording of a live performance.

The composer had to leave his home at a young age to engage in adequate music training. He spent time at the Tuskegee University in Alabama and in Chicago. One can imagine the multitude of potential musical influences Dawson might have had during his early life. Technological advances in the 1920s led to a wide variety of music becoming available through recordings, including symphonic, choral, blues, jazz, gospel, and popular music. Technology also led the advance from silent films to those with synchronized sound. The need for composers to create music to support the narrative of a story was an evolution that built on the legacy of Romantic Era program music and symphonic tone poems.

Symphonic orchestra scores had been used in films for only a few years before the *Negro Folk Symphony* was heard. Many would agree that, on hearing it for the first time, Dawson's music sounds more like a tone poem or an original film score than it sounds like a traditional symphony, with rapid changes in every musical parameter. He uses many of the options available to composers in the harmonic toolbox of his era. The music flows effortlessly between simple diatonic harmony and expressive chromatic harmony. The element that Dawson uses to set this work apart from others is the inclusion of textures based around the sound of the pentatonic scale, the raw melodic ingredient of the "spiritual," and the primordial group of notes found in folk music from every continent.

At the outset of the first movement, *The Bond of Africa*, we hear a French horn outline the pentatonic scale in a mournful descent animated by a syncopation. Dawson gave us some insight into the context of this melody when he wrote in 1963, "...a link was taken out of a human chain when the first African was taken from the shores of his native land and sent to slavery. The solemn motive of the Introduction, first sounded by the horn, symbolizes this missing link." This melody reappears throughout the entire length of the symphony.

PROGRAM NOTES *continued*

Movement 2 is entitled *Hope in the Night*. It features beautiful orchestral passages as well as opportunities for expressive solos, and it has the trappings of musical storytelling. Here is some of what Dawson wrote about the start of this movement:

“This movement opens (Andante, 4/4) with three strokes from the gong, intended to suggest the Trinity, who guides forever the destiny of man. The strings, playing pizzicato, provide a monotonous background, creating the atmosphere of the humdrum life of a people whose bodies were baked by the sun and lashed with the whip for two hundred and fifty years; whose lives were proscribed before they were born. The English horn sings a melody that describes the characteristics, hopes, and longings of a Folk held in darkness. After a climax, this division is followed by one conceived in a happier mood. The children, unmindful of the heavy cadences of despair, sing and play...”

The third movement, *O Le' Me Shine, Shine Like a Morning Star!*, is mostly at a lively tempo, and we hear some spiritual “folk” melodies quoted. Once again, the orchestra’s principal players are featured within the skillful orchestration, and the work ends with a flourish of brass and percussion.

PROGRAM NOTES BY BARRY MCVINNEY © 2024



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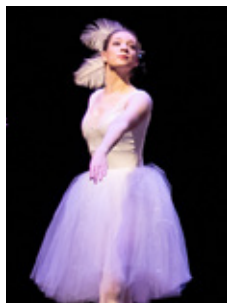
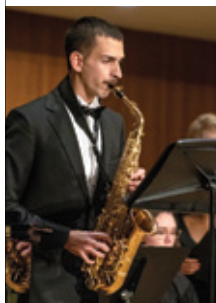
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